

## BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Alma Watanabe

Alma Watanabe was born in Hollywood, California in 1912. When she was eight years old her parents, George and Kusuno Matsumoto, sent her to Japan, where she lived with her paternal uncles. She returned to the United States after three years when her mother passed away.

She then lived with and worked for the Sohier family in Hollywood. She graduated from Hollywood High School. Later, she studied art and education at the University of California at Los Angeles.

In 1940, she married Kenichi Watanabe and moved to Hawai'i. Shortly after World War II began, she was hired as the director of the arts and crafts department at Pālama Settlement. In 1949, she left Pālama Settlement and taught at Kailua Intermediate School.

She returned to California to care for Mrs. Sohier when she became ill.

Watanabe taught elementary school in Berkeley and raised a daughter.

In 1969, she returned once again to Hawai'i and began teaching at Lanikai Elementary School. She retired in 1977.

Tape Nos. 27-22-1-97 and 27-23-1-97

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Alma Watanabe (AW)

Honolulu, O'ahu

May 6, 1997

BY: Holly Yamada (HY)

HY: This is an interview with Alma Watanabe. We're at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in [what was then called] Porteus Hall. It's May 6, 1997, and the interviewer is Holly Yamada.

HY: Just start with when and where you were born.

AW: I was born in Hollywood, California. (My family lived) on Hollywood Boulevard. My father [George Matsumoto] immigrated there in 1907. He (came to) work (for the) Southern Pacific Railroad. (Later) he (sent for) my mother [Kusuno Matsumoto, née Fukumoto] (in Japan). They lived with (the Hoovers, a) Haole family. (Mr. Hoover was one of the directors) of the Hollywood Security Bank. While my father was working on the railroad he helped around the (Hoover) house, and my mother did some cooking (for them). They became part of the family there. After (my father) finished his work on the railroad he had (saved) about \$3,000. So Mr. Hoover, he (suggested that he) buy some property on Hollywood Boulevard. (My father) wanted to start a business (to help) more people (come) from Japan (to work on the railroad or for other jobs). So he (bought) a piece of land in Hollywood and (continued) to enlarge it every time someone (new) came from Japan. He would (provide) rooms for [the immigrants from Japan] and then he would (help them) find jobs. He (also) started importing Japanese food (including rice) from Japan because (it was difficult to get. During those years,) he sent me to Japan for cultural studies (where I lived with my uncle and aunt in Kure near Hiroshima).

HY: How old were you when you were sent Japan?

AW: I was about 8½ years old.

HY: Excuse me. What year were you born in?

AW: Nineteen twelve.

HY: Okay. So you studied in Japan?

AW: My father sent me to Japan to (stay with) my uncle (to have a Japanese education and experience). When I arrived in Japan I was very, very lonely and upset. But I attended a Japanese school where my uncle was the principal, so he really helped me a great deal (with)

language and (math). In the meantime, my mother died of an accident (in California) and (it was decided that I should return to my family in the U.S.).

(My father was from) Wakayama. But I didn't stay in Wakayama because I was with my military uncle who (was stationed) in Maizuru, a navy (port). And he (also taught) at (Kure) so I (lived) there, too. So I had an education from different parts of Japan (during the 3½ years I was there).

HY: How did you feel about coming back to the United States?

AW: I was reluctant at that time (to return) because I felt more (comfortable and adjusted to) life in Japan, (especially) because (my family in Japan really seemed to support and understand me).

HY: Could you describe the house that you lived in when you were in Japan?

AW: My uncle's house was a typical military compound (home). But when we went to Maizuru, we stayed in a (Japanese) house (with tatami floors with shoji windows and doors and a Japanese garden).

(At first) I had a hard time because I (didn't) understand the language too well. But I soon picked it up. Also, when I couldn't solve a (math) problem, my uncle would set a paper in front of me and (tell me that) in a problem there are always two answers given already. So find those answers first, and then you'll find the third answer and you'll get your problem (solved).

HY: Did you have siblings?

AW: I had an older (and younger) brother. I also had (a younger) sister.

HY: Now did they stay in Hollywood with your father?

AW: Yes. (Although) just before the war there was an Oriental orphanage, and my (older) brother was asked to (direct it). He was (selected) to work there and to take care of the (orphans) because the man from Japan that started (the orphanage) wanted to retire to Japan. When the war broke out my brother took all the children to the (Manzanar intern camp). He was (eventually) able to (place all) the children into different homes during the war. And he and (his wife also adopted a girl themselves).

HY: So then you came back to United States right after your mother passed away?

AW: Yes. (I left home at about fifteen years old to live with a Caucasian family as a schoolgirl for four dollars a week. I left because my father remarried and I was unhappy living with my new stepmother. At that time I attended Hollywood High School.)

In Japan, my uncles and my aunt—especially, my uncles (told me), "Education is one thing no one can take away from you, so I want you to be sure to get your education first no matter what you go into." And so I had that in mind. But (my stepmother) wanted to get me married to a rich person. So one day, (she arranged) a meeting (where) I was supposed to serve tea to a prospective husband. I (asked) my (younger) sister to serve the tea. (So she served the tea

instead, and I escaped.) It was then I decided to leave home and go to college. But I had to go through high school first. A friend of mine told me of people in Beverly Hills (who were looking for) a schoolgirl who would help around the house. They would give me lodging, and I could go to school and work after school and on the weekends.

I think it was kind of (a loss of face) for (a Japanese) family to have (their daughter) go off (as a "schoolgirl"). So my father had my brother come after me, and I (agreed to) come home at least for one week. When the week was over, I went back to work again. That was quite a (concern) for my father.

(There was a couple, Mr. and Mr. Walter) Sohier, who used to have my father send people [to work for them]. People who came from Japan would need work and so my father would find jobs for them. He always sent men over to take care of the yard (and clean the house). He (asked Mrs. Sohier) about me, and she said, "I would like to meet your daughter. Maybe I can help you." And so my brother came after me and said there was a woman that Papa knows and that she would like to see me. I went to (the Sohier) home and (I remember they) had a fire glowing. The fire and the fireplace, and they were so warm to me.

Mrs. Sohier didn't want to call me Alma because she didn't think that suited (me). So she just started calling me Cherry Blossom. "So this is the Cherry Blossom that your father, George, told me about." And she said, "I hear that you want to go to college." And I said yes. (She asked me what I wanted to become. At that time, I told her I wanted to go into some sort of science.)

And I said, "Yes, I just want to go college."

And so she said, "I have a mother who is an invalid upstairs, and if you'll take care of my mother I (will) pay you ten dollars a week." That was a lot of money in those days. She said, "You can save some of that for your college."

(She said that she would need me) to take a tray of food up to (her) mother when (she had) to go to a meeting—she used to be very active in politics and Democratic activities.

There were good days and bad days (in my experience there. Once I went) to my friend's and stayed (out) late at night and she was waiting up for me and said, "Cherry Blossom! You just come in." I was trying to sneak upstairs [to] my bedroom. She said, "I want to talk to you. I'm responsible for you. As long as you live in this house, I'm responsible. I want you to learn to become a wonderful person as you grow up. Now, you had your education in Japan and that was wonderful. And now I want you to become a good person, a fine person."

She was an intellectual person. Her husband, Mr. Sohier, was from Boston. His family came on the *Mayflower*. His family had wanted him to go to Harvard [University]. But he (chose) to go to MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] (to become an engineer). And Mrs. Sohier got her degree (from Columbia) University. She was interested in politics. They met in California and they got married.

Mrs. Sohier said she wanted to really adopt me. (But she said that she could not) put my name in the Sohier family because S-O-H-I-E-R was a very (true-blue Bostonian family). She said that they would not allow anyone to (adopt) their name. But she wanted me to know that she

was going to be the person to take care of me.

HY: Did you think of her as a . . .

AW: Mother.

HY: Did you think of Mr. Sohier as a . . .

AW: Father.

HY: As a father?

AW: That's right, but he was quiet, and Mrs. Sohier is the one who was verbal (and strong).

HY: Now you mentioned that she was very involved in the Democratic Party politics. Do you remember what it was that she did?

AW: She used to make political speeches at the Ebell Club [of LA] and the Friday Morning Club. One day she took me out of school (to attend a campaign luncheon)—a rally for FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles. (She wanted) to take me there to make an important impression on me. We had a table in front of the speaker's table. Presidential (candidate Franklin) Roosevelt (was at the speaker's table).

HY: She was campaigning for him?

AW: Yes. It happened that I was the only (young person) in the whole room, and I was (also) the only Oriental. After [Franklin Roosevelt] was elected, Mrs. Sohier had write to him and tell him that I (had been) at the Biltmore [Hotel] and that I was happy that [he was] elected. He wrote back and he said (that he) remembered seeing me (and that I was) the only Oriental in the whole room.

HY: Well, you also mentioned that she was a contact for your father when he was finding jobs for people from Japan. How is it that he had that connection to her at that time?

AW: Mrs. Sohier told me later on that she liked Japanese because she (believed) they were honest and (very) dependable. She could leave the yard to them without having to go out and supervise. I don't know how she found out that my father was trying to get (jobs) for these people. Hollywood was a small (town so) she was able to contact him. (Also she may have known him through his import store.)

HY: Do you remember the name of your father's import store?

AW: I think it was called Cherry Grocery.

HY: Did they build onto the store?

AW: The back of the store was (like a boarding) house.

HY: So it's all one property.

AW: Yes, one property. He kept on building on rooms for them. My mother used to do the cleaning and I would help her on weekends in those days until I went to Japan. My sister was very small. She was only about two [or] three years old when my mother died. Mrs. Sohler said, "You can have your sister come and live with us, too." But she didn't want to. She wanted to stay with my father.

HY: So right from [high school] there you went to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]?

AW: Yes, all the way through (college) Mrs. Sohler helped me. In fact, until I got married. It took her a whole year to fix up the house (for my wedding. I was engaged to Ken [Kenichi Watanabe] for 3½ years before I got married (in 1940. During that time,) I helped him with typing his thesis and theorems. When we got married, we came out to Hawai'i, and his father bought him a house in Mānoa.

HY: He bought a house for him—for you folks?

AW: In 1941 summer we went back to California because Ken had to finish his (doctoral) research at Cal Tech [California Institute of Technology].

HY: Why is it that you came to Hawai'i in the first place?

AW: Because I married Ken.

HY: So---but he was going to school in California, but you decided to move to Hawai'i?

AW: No, we got married in August 1940. And then we came to Hawai'i, and then in 1941 we went back to California (for him to do additional research).

When he finished his Ph.D. at Cal Tech, he applied for jobs at Stanford [University] and University of California, but in those days they would not hire Orientals. So, he was rejected (even though) he had a cum laude (degree). Dean [Ernest Charles] Webster over here [at the University of Hawai'i] finally told him to come Hawai'i—that he would give him a job here.

HY: So, the University of Hawai'i was the only place that would hire him.

AW: Yes, at that time. During the time that I was going to (UCLA, some) people used to laugh at me saying, "What are you going to college for? There's no jobs for you after you graduate." Many of the Oriental students left college just before the war.

HY: Now what did you end up studying at UCLA? I know you mentioned . . .

AW: Mrs. Sohler noticed that I was interested in art so she (suggested that I study art as it would be something to) have all your life and enjoy. (The Department of Education at UCLA was) the only place that taught art at that time. And so I took up art as a major and education as a minor.

HY: So you gave up your interest in science then for art and teaching?

AW: Yes.



HY: Did you feel comfortable with that choice then?

AW: Ah, yes. I think so because it was art. During the time that I was in second year in college, there was a reporter from the *LA Times* who came to the university to look for (a Japanese student to interview). She interviewed several of the [Japanese students]. But she thought that I had the background that she wanted to write up (her story) on—a person who had gone to Japan to study and had come back, and was now going to college, and had to confront prejudice. (For example, I was refused) swimming in high school because the athletic teacher said that I had abscessed teeth. (The Caucasian lady I was staying with at the time, Mrs. DiVinna, guessing that this was a result of prejudice,) went down to the school and (asked why I could not) get into the swimming class. So, the principal said, “There’s no reason that she couldn’t have gotten in.” And so I was able to take [swimming].

HY: What about the other students? How did they accept you or not accept you?

AW: I had a very interesting experience (while at UCLA. I had been invited to a graduation fraternity party by a Caucasian friend whom I met at an) International Club (at UCLA. His father was a professor in the English department. Afterwards he told me that his fraternities told him the girls may not like the idea of an Oriental girl coming. This never happened before. He told me that his church was also having a party. So if I wanted to go to that instead, it was fine. He was thinking of my feelings. But I said, “That’s okay. let’s go to your fraternity graduation party.”)

“I’d like to let you know that they might not accept you,” [he] said. “Suppose they walk out on you?”

I (joked), “Then we’ll have the orchestra to ourselves.”

(He said, “Oh, that’s exactly what I wanted you to feel. That’s wonderful.”)

He was taking sociology course at the university. (Everett [AW’s friend] asked Mrs. Sohier’s permission to take me to the party. But she questioned him because she was worried since she did not feel interracial marriages were wise at that time. But he was able to convince her that he understands and wanted to take me out as a good friend.)

(When we arrived at the party,) it happened that my two French class friends were there. They said they were so happy to see me. There was a program [dance card] for dancing, (and Everett) wrote his name on the first (dance), and (then on) every other one. He knew some of his friends would (also) dance with me. So I had a first dance with him. Then one of the (fraternity) boys asked me if (he could borrow) my program. (When he brought it back, it was filled. They had taken Everett’s name off all the dances) except for the first and last dance.

HY: So you had a full dance card.

AW: Yes. (Later) he told me that he talked to his professor about what happened. And the professor (suggested that he write a report on it. He told me that it would be) going into the sociology department (as a permanent record).

(Laughter)

AW: And so that was (one of my) experiences at UCLA.

And there was another experience where Dr. [Inazo] Nitobe from Japan came (in 1938) just before the war [World War II], and Mrs. Sohler went to the meeting that they had (at UCLA since) she wanted to meet him. She knew that (the worldwide situation was serious). There were only a few students, but he got together with us too. And so he told us (that we) should accept whatever happens and not retaliate or try to do things that would antagonize. (He told us that it was) going to all come out well (in the end). So just accept and go along because we were a minority.

(In 1940,) I got married and we came over [to Hawai'i]. (Then in 1941, Ken had to return to California to work on his doctoral thesis. He left before me, and I followed later by boat. Ken returned at the end of summer to teach at the University of Hawai'i. I stayed for another month with Mrs. Sohler and tried to return to Hawai'i. But they told me that) there won't be any plane or any boat going for passengers until February the following year (due to the situation at the time).

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

AW: And so I came back home and told Mrs. Sohler that I couldn't get the ticket because they were not allowing anyone to leave. And so she went down to the Matson line (office) and talked to the (officer in charge). That's what she told me. Finally she came back, but with the ticket. And I thought to myself, "My goodness, it takes someone like her."

On the boat going over (to the Mainland by myself,) I met Judge [Walter Francis] Frear and his wife. They had a daughter who was having (health) problems. She was in the state room, and Mrs. Frear (went down often) to read to her. Judge Frear told me that it's awfully (tiring for) her. (I offered to help with the readings, so we) took turns.

(When we returned) to Hawai'i, I had to look for job. The only person that I really knew in Hawai'i, who I thought could help me, was Judge Frear. And so I knew him well enough by then that I called him up [to] see if I could see him. (He invited me to his home which) was across the street from Punahou School. (I told him I was looking for a job in the art field. At first he suggested) the [Honolulu] Academy of Arts.

(Then he told me that) Pālama Settlement had an opening (and suggested I may want) to apply.

At that time, my daughter Anne was only three (months old). . . . He (told me to) take the baby (with me to) apply for the job and see what happens. And so he wrote me a very nice recommendation.

I forgot to tell you about the interesting experience I had on the boat. Going over to California, (Judge Frear told me that the) immigration people were going to come on board. And (asked if I had my) passport or birth certificate. (I did not understand why I would need it



since we were traveling in) America. And I didn't believe him. (But) the immigration officials (did) come on board and we all (had to) line up, and when my turn came, they (asked me for a birth certificate).

(I told them I didn't have my birth certificate, but I was) born in California. (They were going to detain me because I didn't have proof of my birth. But unknown to me,) Judge Frear was right behind me. And he said to the official that he would vouch for (me, that I was) an American citizen. And so they let me through.

And so I took Anne in my arms and went down and applied for a job (at Pālama). Alice Yee, (the secretary) carried her while I was interviewed for a job. And I got the job (as director of the arts and crafts department. Mr. [Paul] Anderson, who was the head of the group work area, told me that I would [use] the large room upstairs.)

Some children came in the morning as the schools brought them in for artwork. (But most of them) came in the afternoon, after school hours. We also took them to Pālama-by-the-Sea for the summer camp.

Mr. Anderson said that whatever I want to do with the art department it (would be) up to [me]. So I said I would like to (start) a ceramics (class). I thought, that would be good for adults as well as for children. (He agreed to) start that.

(I told him that I know) of a student at the university, a refugee from Germany (who had) gone through the underground in Holland and had learned how to do a lot of good, big pottery work. (Although, at first, Mr. Anderson was concerned that he did not have a college degree, he was willing at last to try him.)

His name was Tom [Thomas] Maretzki, (and he was a well-liked person and an excellent pottery teacher. Tom said that we would) need wheels (for the potters wheels. I suggested that we ask my ladies sewing class if they had old) sewing machines (to donate to the settlement for the wheels).

We were able to get about five sewing machines. And Tom made them into wheels.

HY: Pottery wheels?

AW: Yes, and then he started afternoon (classes for the children and) evening (classes) for the adults. And I had children make a lot of pottery (pieces as well). So we had quite a thing going in the (art) department.

And then there were times when there were some women (who felt they) needed to (change from) Japanese kimono (to western wear) because they thought that during the war it's not nice to be wearing kimonos around. They wanted to learn how to make American clothes. So I (told them I could help with) simple ones. So I would get patterns (from my sister-in-law and) they would choose a pattern. I (asked) my sister-in-law to [help] because she knew a great deal about sewing.

After that they wanted to learn English. And so before the department hired an English teacher, I was [doing what] little I [could] do to help these ladies. We would also take them to

the Pālama-by-the-Sea. And they would all get into the car and sing away, and just have so much fun. Before this, they never had a (chance to be with other ladies and have fun). And so they were very happy to talk about their families and the hard times they (sometimes) had with their children because they didn't understand their ways. And they wanted to learn more about how to greet people, especially when the boys brought home their friends from the army. So we had a session (about) introducing, (how to greet, and the kind of food to serve). The things that we did at Pālama (were adjusted to the needs of the time. The staff at Pālama had to be creative.)

(At one time a research) ship from Switzerland came (to Hawai'i). Dr. David Bonnet, an entomologist (and professor at UH who was also a friend,) said, "Let's go down there and look at the ship." And so (a group of us) all went down there. And the fellows on the ship, who were six foot (tall) and taller were scientists that were going around (to different parts of) the world, measuring the depth of the sea. They were so happy to meet us.

HY: So you went to see them.

AW: They wanted to see the island. But they didn't want to be invited out by the governor and go around (to typical) places that the governor (would) take them. They wanted to be among (the local) people. And so I said, "How about coming to Pālama Settlement? We're having a Christmas program, and I think you might (enjoy it)." They were so happy to do that. There were about six of them that arrived at Pālama Settlement on Christmas Eve. We were doing the hanging of the greens, and then the children wanted to decorate the (tall) tree, (in the lobby). Then the fellows helped the children decorate the tree. The children were at the bottom and the fellows were (tall enough to) decorate the (top of the) tree. And then finally, we had a wassailing down the hallway with the wreath. We had made a long wreath for that. And we sang the wassailing song all the way around (the building as we) decorated. And then we had a program outside (where) the children (sang Christmas songs. And the visitors) said that they would like to contribute their share of what they do in Switzerland. So they sang songs and danced and showed the children (the steps of the dance). The children were just delighted. (The researchers) had a wonderful time at Pālama. (An experience we would all remember for a long time!)

HY: What age groups were you working with?

AW: Well, there were mostly elementary school age (children). I also had two university student[s], come from the sociology department who helped me with the children.

My daughter was going to [the] University [of Hawai'i's] preschool at that time, and so (the students) would pick her up and, on the bus, bring her to Pālama, so I didn't have to go after her.

HY: Was it---now did you have any responsibility for fund-raising at all?

AW: No. We were so busy with the children. My share of working with the department was mostly for the children. Before I left Pālama, I believe Mr. [A.L.Y] Ward [president of Pālama Settlement trustees] helped Pālama Settlement to financially get back on its feet. I don't know (the details). He was the one who hired Mrs. [Eileen] Watkins to become the [executive] director [1949-51]. (Her tenure there resulted in some major problems so that many of the

group workers were unhappy.) That's when some of us left in 1949 to go into DOE [Department of Education]. (I personally wasn't affected as much as some of the others, but I saw and heard about the problems. I don't remember the details.)

HY: What were some of the issues that you had problems with her as a director?

AW: (She seemed more concerned with appearances than supporting the Pālama staff and understanding the local children's needs.)

We really felt sorry about leaving because we got so attached (to the children and the community).

HY: Maybe you could talk a little about Pālama-by-the-Sea. You mentioned that there were Japanese women there, but also the kids—what kind of activity did you do with the children?

AW: The Japanese women just enjoyed being near the sea, and to be together, and talk about their family problems. They were so glad to get away. Some of them were glad to get away from their husbands, but they more or less wanted to talk about their children and the problems that they (faced at home). We would take little artwork [projects] that they could do at the same time (as they socialized).

But with the children, we had a program going on during the summer. (For example,) we did a lot of arts and crafts with things we could find over there (such as shells, leaves, pods) and make some(thing creative). We also used to (do) arts and crafts with the sand. In the evenings, we would get together in the dining room and have singing (time). The children would put on plays or puppet shows. And they (also learned to) make puppets. (We would have a big fire on the beach with wieners and marshmallows.)

HY: Would their parents come with them or was it just the children?

AW: It was mostly just the children (and their counselor). Sometimes (one or two) parents (who wanted) to help came also. But they were so happy that the children had a chance to get away from home. . . . It was a good experience for them.

HY: Were these mostly children from the Pālama area?

AW: Yes. It was a neighborhood program at that time. There might have been some families that wanted their children to be at Pālama [who were not from the neighborhood]. We opened up our art department when it was necessary for teachers around the neighborhood to bring their children to Pālama. And then we had a music department that (offered) piano (lessons. There were also) hula lessons for the kids.

HY: Is there a lot of coordination between the different departments, say music and dance and maybe arts and crafts? Sounds like you had a lot of interaction with all the different departments there.

AW: Oh, yes. One time we had the play. Then when the children did the singing part, the music department would have them practice over there. And then if they're doing dancing, well the music department would have the dancing. And then the art department helped when we did

any[thing] like making clothes, (puppets or fixing sets,) painting and so forth.

HY: Did you consult with parents or was your interaction mostly with the children?

AW: It was mostly with the children, as I remember. The parents very seldom came to Pālama except for an occasion like a Christmas (program or international) program. Somehow or another, I guess, they [the parents] were too busy working and they didn't have time. And some parents came because they had problems with their children.

HY: A discipline problem?

AW: (Sometimes.) And they would talk to me about it. See if I could help them.

HY: What kinds of problems were more common?

AW: I think it was mostly discipline [problems]. The children won't listen to [their parents]. Even the mothers of boys that went to war said that there was no communication between the parent and the children, and so they were worried because they didn't know whether they're going to be able to understand them when they (returned home. Also,) when (the children) had problems they would come crying and we would try to help them work it out. (We talked with them and helped them get involved with art and swimming, et cetera.)

HY: Who were some of your other coworkers that you worked closely with besides [swimming instructor] Nelson [Kawakami]?

AW: One was Phyllis [Leong], who used to teach (cooking). And I think Janet took over . . .

HY: Janet Nakashima.

AW: Janet Nakashima took over her position when Phyllis got married. And there was Esther So [Pālama Preschool principal] who I was closely connected with.

HY: Was John Kelly teaching music at that time?

AW: Yes. I remember him very well. He was very good. Mrs. [Alice] Barnes who used to be in charge of the music department and she also was very (capable).

HY: Now did your daughter take lessons from her?

AW: Yes. She did.

HY: When you were working at Pālama Settlement where were you living?

AW: (Since my divorce,) I was living in 'Ālewa Heights, up Pu'unui and Waolani [Avenue] below the hill. And I was living in a cottage behind a house that was owned by Japanese family.

HY: You never lived at Pālama Settlement though?

AW: No. At times when I had to work at night they would take her into the rooms in the back so

someone could watch her. [Reginald] Hailele, who used to do a part-time job at Pālama, used to come over and baby-sit for me (at my home). And so it worked out pretty well. (The Pālama family) saw to it that the (staff) families were taken care of. And then when Anne was four years old her eyes crossed and so Mr. [Theodore R.] Rhea, who was the director at that time [1942-48], (was head) of the Lions Club. So when Anne had her operation (the Lions Club) paid for everything. (I have always been grateful for that.)

HY: So you felt very well-taken care of at Pālama?

AW: Yes. I felt very comfortable and I enjoyed the children (and the Japanese women). For instance, I was overtaking a truck going to Pālama-by-the-Sea with all these women singing away and I got carried away too, and I passed a truck and I kept on going fast, I guess. The police stopped me and (the women) got all worried about me, so they all decided they were going to (help me pay for the ticket). And so it was okay.

HY: So, in '49 you said you had decided to leave Pālama Settlement.

AW: In '49. Definitely. I just didn't want to stay any longer because the situation (at Pālama) [with the new director, Eileen Watkins] was (unpleasant for many of us. Many people) were unhappy.

HY: Was this mostly the workers at Pālama Settlement that were unhappy, or did you notice any of the people you serviced were also unhappy? Were they aware of some of the problems or it mostly just affected the workers?

AW: (Mainly the workers felt she was not open to suggestions or ideas from the staff.) This was not (what) Pālama (should be) to them—(not the same positive, supportive atmosphere as before).

HY: And then what did you do after you left Pālama Settlement?

AW: I went into teaching art at Kailua [Intermediate School]. The principal was a very fine person. He (gave me freedom to coordinate the art program). So I really had fun.

HY: Free reigns.

AW: So I (was able) to order (a kiln,) and new shelves that could stack all the large papers, and drawers to put the leather work. And then finally, I got to a point where I was coordinating art for the elementary [school] because there was (a large group of classes—second, third graders). I organized it so that they would bring the children into the art department with the teacher. Also, my seventh- and eighth-grade homeroom (students) were ready to help me, and so they put the clay out, fixed up the clay, molded it, and wedged it. They had it ready for children when they came in. (With the new kiln, we were) able to fire it at (the same) time.

Everything was going (well, until) I had to leave because (Mrs. Sohler came down with) cancer. And she said they would like to have me come back to California if I could. I was so torn between leaving and wanting to stay (in Hawai'i, that I developed) hives. We moved up to Berkeley, and then I went into teaching in the Berkeley area.

HY: You were teaching art?



AW: No, regular elementary at that time.

HY: I see.

AW: In '69. I came [back] to Hawai'i for the summer, and I got a job at Lanikai [Elementary] School because there was a teacher who was leaving. And so the principal said, "Oh, you're just in time. I'd like to hire you for the semester." So I went back to my home in California and had one week (to prepare to move to Hawai'i). That's when I lived with the (David Bonnet family in an apartment attached to their home in Lanikai).

HY: Now when you first started teaching at the DOE after you left Pālama Settlement, how was it that you got your job at Kailua [Intermediate] School?

AW: (I believe Michiko Higa and I applied and were accepted.)

Then, when I went back to California, Anne went to LA [Los Angeles] High School, then to UCLA. And then we moved up to Berkeley, and so she went to (UC Berkeley for one year, then UC San Francisco to get her degree in) physical therapy.

END OF SIDE TWO

TAPE NO. 27-23-1-97; SIDE ONE

HY: Okay. So what I was asking you is there must have been, I assume, quite a change from the last time you lived in California to now in the 19[60]s when you moved back. Were you aware of any changes? You had talked about the problems of being Japanese in California.

AW: The prejudice (was less in the 1960s. In the late 1930s,) when I was going to UCLA, when I would take the bus, sometimes (the bus driver) would not leave me off at the place I wanted to get off. He would not even stop. He would [stop] about two blocks away, and then he'd let me off. (Once in high school,) I went to Santa Cruz with a group of high school students, and they wouldn't let me go into the public swimming pool up there. (Because of that, the students) decided not to go in. Because they were wonderful kids who (stood with me), and I have never forgotten that.

When I lived with a family [the DiVinna's family]—before I went to Mrs. Sohier's—[Mrs. DiVinna] had a Japanese baseball team. I used to go with her. She's the one who went to high school and told them, "Why is it that she cannot enter the swimming class?" Her husband, Mr. Clyde DiVinna, was the head cameraman at the (Metro Goldwyn Meyer) studio in Hollywood. His picture was coming out and he wanted all of us to go over there (to the opening night), so he got a box seat at the theater. When we got there, the (manager) would not let (me go into the) box seat because I was Oriental. Mr. DiVinna (was very angry and) said, "I want to speak to the manager." And so he (confronted) the manager (with many words). Finally, he just said, "We're not going to stay in a place like this. We're going home!"

(Since it was Mr. DiVinna's picture,) they apologized and they said, "That's all right. She can



go in with you.” But by then Mr. D. was so mad that he just said, “No. We’re just going to go home. You can have your seats.” (He said a lot more but that is the gist of it.) And so we weren’t able to see his picture because of that. So things like that happened in California (when I was in high school). And then after I got back to California after college, it seems that I don’t remember (as much) prejudice. At UC Berkeley I (took a) psychology class (about interpersonal relations. I thought) maybe it’ll be good for me to take this course because I was still having [a] problem about my identity. One day we went to the [teacher’s] home to have [a] discussion. There were about twenty-five of us of all [different] nationalities. She had us talking about what effect the other person had on you and so forth. (There was a person of another race, who) started off by saying to this fellow, “Oh, I like you because I could understand where I am when I talk to you.” And he came to me and said, “You know, you’re so cold. You don’t have any personality.”

I said, “That’s all right.”

And the others said, “You’re going to take that?”

And some of the other (people) were crying because they were hurt—not because of me, but what that other person had said about them.

And I said, “No. It doesn’t bother me.”

They said, “Why doesn’t it bother you?”

“Because,” I said, “It’s not important to me.”

(I was one of the first ones to leave) and the teacher followed me out to my car. And she said, “Alma, I have a feeling you had the same experience I had.”

And I said, “What’s that?”

And she said, “You know,” she says, “When I had my problem—my domestic problem—I had a wall in front of me. I wasn’t going to let anybody hurt me.” And she said, “You seem to have the same problem.”

I said, “That’s true. I do.” I said, “I’m not going to let anyone hurt me anymore.”

And she said, “Well, you know Alma, I found out that you lose out by feeling that way. It’s better to try to get over that hump and just be yourself. Just relax and enjoy being with people.” And then she said, “You really [can’t live your life] thinking that you’re not going to have anyone hurt you anymore.”

HY: Did you take that advice to heart?

AW: Yes. I tried to. Because I felt that she really knew me well enough to tell me that. So that’s what I got out of that class.

HY: Now this when you’re . . .

AW: This was when I was living in El Cerrito in San Francisco.

HY: So this in the [19]60s.

AW: That's right. In the [19]60s.

HY: This is going back a bit, but you had mentioned that you had been told that it's maybe a good idea not to react to people who are behaving negatively toward you because of racism. How did you feel about being told not to respond to that? Did that make good sense to you, or did you feel that you wanted to retaliate?

AW: Well, you know . . .

HY: How did you feel about that?

AW: In Berkeley—when I was living up there—we went to a group meeting about racial (problems). And there were (other nationalities) as well as Oriental people. And one person (of another race) told me, "You know, what we should do is just stick together! We should fight together!" And I thought to myself, "She carries a chip on her shoulder. And that's not so good." My attitude was that she shouldn't be that way. She would get further ahead if she didn't feel that way. I guess it didn't bother me (as much) because I went through so much in the past that I tried to understand. When Dr. Nitobe came to UCLA and told us [that] we are a minority, so right now that we should. . . .

HY: Accept.

AW: Accept. And then later on things will (turn) out. And it did, see. But still there are people that are still prejudiced. Even after the war, when people. . . . In fact, when my family went to war and I was couldn't leave Hawai'i, my father died in [an internment] camp. When they came back [from the camps] many of the families had such a terrible time because they weren't accepted in their own homes. Stones were thrown through their windows and all the problems that they had, especially in the country areas. When you think of that, it's kind of hard to be patient.

HY: Your father was interned during the war?

AW: Yes.

HY: Where was he interned?

AW: Manzanar, [California].

HY: Were some of the your other family members interned?

AW: Yes. My sister went with Father. My older brother, Henry, took all his orphanage children there. And my (second) brother volunteered in the 100th [Infantry] Battalion, but he went into the 442nd [Regimented Combat Team] after that. And so [the family was] scattered.

HY: Did your father lose his property then?

AW: Yes. He lost everything. It was just after the depression when the war started. Well, he was a good man and he would be feeding the farmers in North Hollywood area. There were a lot of Japanese farmers that during the depression who were not being able to make money at all. A bunch of carrots would cost only (five cents). And they were having a hard time. So my father would take a sack of rice to them. He would have his men deliver all these things, and he just (kept the) receipt of all the things that he sold them, but he didn't demand any payment because he knew they were having (a difficult) time. My brother could not collect any of the debts that they owed. Those were the (hard times).

HY: So when you were living with the Sohler family did you stay in touch with your biological family?

AW: Oh, yes. I used to visit my father because of my sister. I would pick her up. One day Mrs. Sohler wanted me to be out of the house till five o'clock in the afternoon because she was going to be busy with a political (meeting). That's after her mother had died. She gave me fifteen dollars to go to Brown Derby in Hollywood with my sister. She said, "You take your sister and go to Brown Derby and you'll see actresses like Claudette Colbert and (Bette Davis)." She said, "You're going to enjoy watching them." I picked up my sister and (went there for) lunch. Mrs. Sohler said, "I want you to be back home by five o'clock." I forgot my sweater, so I thought I better sneak into the house and get it. When I went in, Mrs. Sohler was going up and down the steps to the second floor making her speech. I thought, "There must be somebody in the house she's talking to." But, she was talking to an imaginary audience. I sneaked out again.

I thought she was really a wonderful person. When she died I just felt that I missed a part of me. She really loved me from her heart. And I knew that. She used to mend my socks.

HY: So you really had two families?

AW: Yes, but my father was like most Japanese men. They don't know how to talk to their children. I would just talk to him when the church had a camp and I wanted my sister to go. And so I would (ask) him, "She would need some money. Can you help her?" And when I left the house (to live away,) I told my father, "I'm not going to ask you—not even for a penny." Then he tried to give me some money afterward, but I wouldn't take it. So actually—since I left the house—I didn't receive any money from my father. All—everything that's done for me was by Sohler family. (The Söhlers made it possible for Anne and I to own a house when we moved to Northern California).

HY: So then in 1969, you said you went back to Hawai'i again and started teaching [again].

AW: Sixty-nine. And then that's when I got a job at Lanikai (and lived in an apartment in the Bonnet home for almost ten years. Then I moved to my present home in Kailua.)

In the morning, I would walk (down to the beach) when the sun was coming up. It was just so beautiful. That's why I still live (here) now. But now I'm ready to give it up that.

HY: Ready to move on again.

AW: Move on.

HY: So you continued to teach at Lanikai School and then you retired?

AW: I retired from Lanikai (School).

HY: Do you remember what year you retired in?

AW: Nineteen seventy-six.

HY: I just wanted to ask you . . .

AW: I did some substituting after that.

HY: Oh, some substitute teaching?

AW: Yes. You know, it's very hard to get away from school once you start teaching. Most people, like to do substituting to keep in contact with the (children).

HY: I wanted to ask you something about Pālama Settlement. Do you remember what kind of pay—what kind of salary you got when you were there?

AW: I know that at the university Ken was getting \$279 take-home pay and I think I was getting about half of that, as I remember, at Pālama.

HY: What was your title?

AW: Director of the art department. It was really funny because then that put me in the same classification as the girls who got their masters in social work. Group department—they all had their masters and that's what Mr. (Anderson required). Mr. Anderson (preferred staff) with titles you see. In that way I was able to get more or less that same kind of pay that they were getting. And I think that's when the directorship came in. Mr. Ward was very sorry that he had hired Mrs. Watkins. He told us that he was sorry, that he didn't know what kind of person [she was].

HY: Well, is there anything else you want to talk about?

AW: No, I don't have. . . . I wish that I had had enough time to study for what I did at Pālama with the children. We had such a wonderful experience there.

HY: Do you look fondly back on those times?

AW: Oh yes, very much so. And I just wonder sometime—I'd like to meet some of those kids that grew up at Pālama.

HY: Did you keep in touch with any of them?

AW: No, because I've been moving around and been so busy myself that I didn't. Even the centennial that they had there [Pālama Settlement celebrated the centennial in 1996], I was surprised how it changed—the whole place had been changed. So when we were introduced to all the different departments, it was so different from what we used to have.

HY: Okay. Anything else?

AW: Not that I know of.

HY: Okay. Thank you very much.

AW: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

# **Reflections of Pālama Settlement**

**Volume I**

**Center for Oral History  
Social Science Research Institute  
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa**

**August 1998**